

On the National Question

Native Study Group + 1975

[LOOP is republishing this important essay from the Vancouver-based Native Study Project. The text is transcribed from [“On the National Question: Letter from the Native Study Group,” LSM News, vol. 2, no. 1, 1975, pp. 19-21](#). The “Prologue” to Lee Maracle’s *Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel* is an important critique of the “arrogance, the sexism and the racism” that shaped the Liberation Support Movement’s attempts at “leadership” of oppressed peoples by a member of the Native Study Group. In [False Nationalism False Internationalism \(now available in a new edition from Kersplebedeb\)](#), E. Tani and Kae Sera argue that the LSM provides a potent example of how “solidarity and good intentions became a cover for advancing the parasitism so deeply rooted in settler culture.” Other writings from members of the Native Study Group can be found at the [“Marxism & Indigenous Peoples” resource archive](#) maintained by M. Gouldhawke.]

Dear Editor:

We have read with some pleasure the third issue of “*LSM News*.” *LSM News*, while still retaining its “news” character, has provided the LSM, its supporters and fraternal organizations with a theoretical forum through which the political principles guiding LSM’s practice can be expressed. This is important as it has been our experience that other “left” organizations have found it all too easy to categorically dismiss LSM as a “non-political, liberal” organization that “sends care packages to the ‘good guys’ in Africa.” It also provides us (would-be anti-imperialists) with an objective view of the struggles and the obstacles/contradictions within some of the liberation movements themselves without the usual arrogance of the left. We have found that all too often North American left groups stand on the sidelines condemning, in a more or less puritanical way, the “flaws” of national liberation organizations from the vantage point of their own comfortable middle class, and without having done any prior social investigation into the conditions of the people they are analyzing. An example of such politically irresponsible criticism can be seen in the Canada Party of Labor’s recent attack on the Frelimo’s “anti-strike” law. It is indeed inspiring to read the publication of a regular journal by an organization that is not blinded by North American “big nation chauvinism.”

In the article by Beth Youhn and C. Wright, “Americans in China,” we noted the statement “... that most North American organizations which support China’s anti-revisionist struggles have not yet even begun to confront this phenomenon – either in theory or practice – within their own country.” I assume that Beth and Carol will take seriously their responsibility for dealing with this phenomenon in a later issue of *LSM News*. In the meantime, I would like to make some comments on an equally condemned (by the left) phenomenon to which the remarks of Youhn and Wright are also applicable, i.e. social imperialism.

The recent propaganda of the Communist Party of Canada (Marxist-Leninist), particularly during the Native People’s Caravan, is the most glaring example of social imperialism. While the native people had organized themselves into a caravan (leaving from Vancouver and arriving in Ottawa on the opening day of Parliament) to oppose the Department of Indian Affairs’ Colonial Policy, the CPC(M-L) was carrying out extensive support propaganda around the nebulous slogan of *Defend the Hereditary Rights of Native Peoples*. Interestingly enough, this same organization, while calling for hereditary rights for native people, is calling for national liberation of the Quebecois. This is not a thorough analysis of social imperialism, but I would like to comment here on how the social imperialism of the Canadian left affects the native internal colony in Canada.

In both theory and practice the left in Canada fails to recognize the historic right of internally colonized native people to self-determination. Instead they seek to establish political domination of the Canadian working class, of which they consider themselves the “vanguard,” over the internal colonies. The manner in which they intend to accomplish this end varies from group to group but the result is everywhere the same, i.e. political parasitism and uncritical support of militant of native peoples with a view to establishing the ideological supremacy of their political line over the developing nationalism of the native people. That line being, of course, the strictly working class character of the Canadian revolution without the recognition of the right to nationhood, including secession, of the internally colonized native peoples.

The rationales for not recognizing our right to nationhood vary with the two main ones being: 1. That national liberation and secession is not feasible; 2. The Indian people cannot liberate themselves without allying with the Canadian working class. Both these arguments have little to do with the historic right of colonized peoples and the duty of socialists to support that right (Lenin did not exclude internal colonies), or with a clear Marxist analysis of imperialism and internal colonization. Given that objective we are an historically colonized people and that our right to self-determination is *inalienable*, the next logical question would be: Under what conditions is national liberation for the internal colonies in North America realizable? The question of “infeasibility” arises only from the defeatist notion that the forces of imperialism are stronger than native people and that the Canadian working class is incapable and unwilling to support, and is indeed opposed, to national

liberation for native people, and that their left representatives are incapable and unwilling to struggle courageously against the chauvinism within their own working class. Such political cowardice is objectively social imperialist. The second rationale, regarding an alliance with the Canadian working class, is equally cowardly and bespeaks of a certain type of chauvinism on the part of certain “left representatives of class struggle here in Canada.” On whose terms should an alliance between the people of a dominated colonized nation and the workers of the dominating mother country be? It is obvious that using this “need for unity with the mother country workers” is a cover for denying us our right to nationhood; that in fact the terms of such an alliance, are to be dictated by the social imperialists of the left, backed by the chauvinist mother country working class. We, of course, cannot accept as conditions of an alliance those dictated by the needs of “mother country” workers. Any alliance between ourselves and the workers of Canada must be mutually beneficial and equal, based on mutual respect for each other’s sovereignty. No other conditions of alliance will do!

The third, though not so popular, rationale is that the native people are scattered and split up geographically over the entire country. Of all the rationales this one is the most shameless as it lays bare the paucity of left knowledge and its lack of investigation of our situation, and indeed of their own conditions. In Canada the majority of citizens live within two hundred miles of the Canadian border. In the so-called Canadian north (above the 59th parallel), 75% of the people are native. Among northern native people, tribal and linguistic differences are minimized by like conditions and 100 years of common colonial history. They have a common cultural background, common land base; they form the majority of the population and are colonized, hence they have a right to nationhood.

These feeble excuses of the left, offered up as rationales for opposing our rights, belie lack of historical projection and indicate an absence of understanding of the historic and economic roots of social chauvinism and social imperialism. Indeed, the evasion of the question of privilege among workers in Canada in all their literature is clear proof of this.

Privilege among the people of Canada arises from its relation to imperialism, as a loyal beneficiary of which the Canadian workers receive an ample share of super-profit crumbs in exchange for fealty to imperialism. Canada has long boasted the second highest standard of living in the “free world.” Its workers receive high wages; its unemployed enjoy welfare benefits, and it has a relatively low inflation rate. Industrially, it is the least productive of the advanced capitalist countries.

The loyalty generated by such privilege manifests itself in the general political paralysis of the workers, even in struggling for the slightest reform; its acceptance of “fat cat” union hacks as leadership; its racism and (let us admit) its genuinely anti-communist attitudes. These privileges are, of course, dependent on the continuance of imperialist super-exploitation of the neo-colonies/colonies from whence they derived. National liberation struggles ever more successful are puncturing holes in the well-being of the Canadian peoples and, as such, their privilege is decreasing. It is this as yet minor decrease in privilege that has given rise to

what little “radical” thought and activity exists here, but not without a generous heap of social imperialism and chauvinism arising from long years of parasitic and privileged existence.

That the struggle of native peoples is intricately bound up with the general struggle for international socialism we will be the last to deny. But that has little to do with our historic right to nationhood, to our right to secede should we choose. Given that the political paralysis of the Canadian peoples is dependent on privilege arising from super-profits, and that these same privileges are dependent on the continuance of super-exploitation of neo-colonized and internally colonized peoples, it follows that the national liberation struggles of these same peoples taken as a whole constitutes the determining factor in resolving the contradiction between imperialism and socialism.

The Canadian left, blinded by its own chauvinism and an undying slavish fealty to its own workers, has failed to see that the decisive factor determining the development of the objective conditions for revolutionary struggle here in Canada, and in our own nation, does not lie within its own country but rather with the success of national liberation struggle in the colonies/neo-colonies of imperialism. The left in Canada would do better to use Marxism as a guide to analysis rather than quote verbatim some of the slogans of the European working class of 1848.